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The Radical Intellectual Legacy of Saba Mahmood

But what I have come to ask of myself, and would like to ask the reader, as well, is: Do my political visions ever run up against the responsibility that I incur for the destruction of life forms so that “unenlightened” women may be taught to live more freely? Do I even fully comprehend the forms of life that I want so passionately to remake? Would an intimate knowledge of lifeworlds that are distinct from mine ever question my own certainty about what I prescribe as a superior way of life for others?¹

This dossier offers a tribute to Saba Mahmood, as a mark of both recognition as well as deep gratitude for what has been a most remarkable intellectual contribution to the humanities and social sciences in contemporary times. Her work marks a turning point in critical thought and her texts have become a part of the canon across a range of disciplines including Islamic studies, postcolonial and feminist theory as well as cultural anthropology. In opening space for thinking both within as well as beyond the limits of the liberal imaginary. Saba’s scholarship encouraged a radical reframing of intellectual thought. It was an invitation to become more aware of the parochialism of our own positions and the hubris with which we, even as critical and progressive scholars, operate. Her scholarship was committed to encouraging engagement with another’s world view not only with respect but also an openness to learning regardless of our place and status within the established academy. Her writings introduced a refreshing element of humility to intellectual engagement, as well as a sense of accountability for what we write and publish in the name of, and on behalf of, the world’s ‘Others’.

The sanguine meticulousness of Saba’s scholarship has been simultaneously disconcerting and productive in creating space for *real* conversations between the global north and the

¹ Saba Mahmood, ‘Feminist Theory, Agency, and the Liberatory Subject: Some Reflections on the Islamic Revival in Egypt’, *Nemenos: Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion*, 42:1(2006), 31-72, p. 61. Available at <https://journal.fi/temenos/article/view/4633>

global south, the liberal self and the non-liberal 'Other'. It has also pushed back against the conceits of western liberal knowledge as self-contained and complete, exposing them as divisive, exclusive and implicated in the harms, injuries and tragedies that we see unfolding across the globe, not only in authoritarian regimes but also liberal democracies. In bringing an ingenious critical challenge to the way in which we think about concepts such as subjectivity, agency, secularism and religion Saba provided a sorely needed sense of direction and grounding to a progressive politics that has lost its way, stagnated and become unmoored.

It not possible to do justice to Saba's oeuvre in this short contribution. I will therefore highlight two features of her work that have been radical and transformative. My insights are offered both in celebration of her work as well as a lament over the loss of an eminent intellectual and dear friend. First, I highlight her work on the veiled subject and its challenge to liberal individualism, drawing largely on her first path breaking book, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*.² Second, I present her analysis of secularism that culminated in her last book, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*.³ I provide a more elaborate discussion of the latter text that was published towards the end of her life. Discussion of this text was cut off prematurely, though it is having a significant posthumous life and generative power. My discussion hones on how these two contributions have paved the way for a radical politics by taking it beyond the liberal imaginary, its exclusionary and retrogressive features, while also offering genuine possibility for understanding and transformation beyond the liberal imaginary. Saba's contribution in both these realms has attracted hostility and critique as well as applause and recognition in equal measure.

The Radical Veiled Subject

Saba's work is particularly inspirational for those of us seeking to move beyond the parched landscape of Eurocentric discourse, replete with its racial and civilizational hierarchies, homophobia, Islamophobia and Imperial feminisms. Her work is a living and vital contribution that enables the postcolonial scholar to finally find the space to breathe and not feel corralled by old worn out paradigms where both critique and solutions circumbulate endlessly within the same fishbowl – offering a politics that is nihilistic and can take us nowhere.

Saba's first path breaking contribution to critical thought was *The Politics of Piety*, a dazzling piece of scholarship that unsettled the Eurocentric world of cultural anthropology, political theory and feminist politics. The book provides a micro ethnographic analysis of the practice of veiling amongst the Muslim women's revival or *da'wa* – a deeply conservative mosque movement in Cairo in the 1990s. With basilisk precision Saba analyses the role of piety as a deeply ethical practice in spiritual pursuit that reflects the practitioner's personal choice and active desire to veil. It is a practice that permeates every aspect of the adherent's life and includes women who are highly literate and socially mobile. They are actively engaged in the process of self-making in and through the ethical parameters of Islam. Saba brings within the scope of her argument a critique of concepts of agency based on western conceptions of

² Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

³ Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

rationality and liberal conceptions of freedom that necessarily require an 'Other' to flourish. She traces how these concepts have been aggressively asserted in the post-9/11 era, where feminists have joined the chorus of liberal democratic governments in their excoriations of Islamic practices, including the practice of veiling. She provides a powerful rebuttal of this position by dissecting and disrupting the lines between religion and the secular. She foregrounds the lifeworlds of 'Others' or non-liberal subjects in non-Western societies that are foreclosed by positions that view veiling exclusively as a tradition that invariably subordinates and from which women *must* be rescued. In the process, she demolishes the assumption that the non-Western 'Other' simply acts out of tradition or an antiquated cultural code by default or lack of choice.

The *Politics of Piety* offers an incisive critique of agency as aligned with either liberal autonomy or resistance. The critique argues against the rescue or saviour mentality that informs human rights, especially feminist endeavours, and encourages greater reflection on the imperialist tendencies and righteousness nestled in such pursuits. In this text, as in much of Saba's scholarship, there is a renegotiation of the feminist political project, to ensure that it does not remain static, become dogmatic or morph into a salvific force that broaches no challenge or interrogation. She practiced the very ethics that she witnessed in her subjects and was willing to pose enormously challenging questions:

What do we mean when we as feminists say that gender equality is the central principle of our analysis and politics? How does my being enmeshed within the thick texture of my informants' lives affect my openness to this question? Are we willing to countenance the sometimes violent task of remaking sensibilities, life worlds, and attachments so that women like those I worked with may be taught to value the principle of freedom?⁴

In *Politics of Piety*, feminists in the global north and south are singled out as invariably adhering to a specific form of liberal agency, one that is sexualised, unveiled and rational/without the trappings of tradition. Saba's analysis reveals how the issue of the veil cannot be reduced to being either for or against the practice; or as operating along a gender equality/tolerance divide. These binaries simply miss the challenge posed by the subjectivity of the veiled woman and her *choice* to wear the veil as an ethical practice as well as a tool of emancipation. The practice of wearing the veil not only transcends the liberal framing of life along a public and private divide, it cannot be understood within a politics of 'resistance to relations of domination, and the concomitant naturalisation of freedom as a social ideal.'⁵ The practice of veiling is not understood within the terms of subordination or oppression, but as an ethical practice that reflects another way of being and living in the world. In combining an ethical subject formation in relation to the pietist Muslim woman with Foucault's analysis of the technologies of the self, Saba brought into crisis the 'unfettered' liberal autonomous subject to which Western feminism has been linked. Her layered and complex understanding of subjectivity offers a direct challenge to liberal thought and a feminist politics that remains singularly committed to this knowledge paradigm.

The book exposes the patronising and imperialising approach of feminists and liberal intellectuals towards the 'Other' woman especially in the post-9/11 era that witnessed the resurgence of old colonial tropes about the 'Other' and claims of civilizational superiority of

⁴ Mahmood, 'Liberatory Subject', p. 62.

⁵ Mahmood, 'Liberatory Subject', p. 39.

the West. She points to the need to bring more humility into our global quest to liberate women. She pointedly asks,

[D]oes a commitment to the ideal of equality in our own lives endow us with the capacity to know that this ideal captures what is or should be fulfilling for everyone else? If it does not, as is surely the case, then I think we need to rethink, with far more humility than we are accustomed to, what feminist politics really means?⁶

In pushing these questions, Saba resisted offering prescriptions that invariably brought us back to the very place that produced the problems we have sought to resolve. Instead, she offered a different cadence through which to understand and recite liberation, freedom and emancipation.

Politics of Piety was an instant sensation though it also produced disquiet amongst feminists, progressive and leftist scholars and activists. The text invited accusations that Saba had betrayed the cause of secularism and her arguments could easily be appropriated by orthodox and conservative voices. Saba stood her ground in asserting that her work foregrounded a range of new ethnographies and lifeworlds in non-western contexts that were based on ethical subjects. Her challenge was directed at the ethnocentric assumptions on the part of feminists and other progressives that non-western women simply acted out of habit and all their acts determined by a primitive, backward cultural space. In foregrounding the ethical subject in the context of the pious Islamic revivalist woman, she unmasked the civilizational and racist assumptions underpinning engagements with non-Western women or the 'Other'. The book offered an alternative vision of a political, moral and ethical life and human flourishing at the very moment when the divide between 'us' and 'them' and the targeting of the 'Other' as a danger and threat to liberal values was being aggressively asserted. She persisted in presenting her arguments at highly contentious events with her lambent confidence combined with her hallmark warmth, directness and humour. Her work on piety was not a defence of the 'Other' nor an unequivocal endorsement of the practice of veiling. It was both of a comparative nature, as well as one that cultivated in her a commitment to self-interrogation. She questioned the paradoxes and complexities of her own lifeworld and its truths and accepted the discomforts that this process entailed.

The turn to the ethical subject is a turn that compels the progressive scholar to take seriously another's world view. It pushes us to interrogate how our own interventions can inflict harm and result in epistemological erasures. It is an argument that has enormous appeal to those scholars who are either seeking, familiar with, live alongside or within alternative lifeworlds. It is a politics that proposes a serious space from which to challenge cultural relativists, religious nationalists of the Hindutva, Islamist or Buddhist Singhalese variety, and other orthodox positions, while also remaining unaccepting of liberalism as the default position for progressive and feminist politics in these despairing times.

The Janus-face of Secularism

Saba's work on agency and the religious subject cannot be separated from her second major contribution – analysing the relationship between secularism and religion at a structural level and its devastating impact on religious minorities. In her book *A Minority Report*, Saba traced

⁶ Mahmood, 'Liberatory Subject', p. 62

the many contradictions in secular governance and how it is implicated in solidifying religious differences and divisions.

In bringing religion 'out of the closet' Saba does not seek to reinforce subordinating or retrograde practices, nor does she accept that the evacuation of religion from liberal thought is indeed a fact. Her work engages critically and meticulously with the concept of secularism, drilling down to its core and tracing the work it does in liberal democratic contexts as well as in authoritarian spaces, and its impact on minority rights in both contexts. She argues while at a formal level the category of minority is projected as an equal citizen in law, this claim neglects the power inequalities that have produced the very category of minority through the privileging of majoritarian norms. These norms remain obscured from view by political secularism's claims to neutrality that acts as the fig leaf through which they are pursued.

Secularism is largely conceived of as a progressive end goal marking the transition of society from the irrational dark ages of religious domination and belief into the period of rational thought and modernity. It is achieved through the separation of religion from the State and the neutral role of the state in matters of religion. This teleological narrative and minimalist formulation presents secularism as an end goal that will ultimately resolve religious conflict. Building on a burgeoning arena of critical studies that have challenged this classical account of secularism, Saba puts into crisis the common assumption about secularism as a social and political ideal, by setting out its critical genealogy and demonstrating how it in fact has exacerbated religious conflict.⁷ She argues that secularism is neither the bedrock from which religion emerges nor what remains when religion is subtracted. It is the product of colonial and postcolonial legacies as well as Enlightenment thought that has specific epistemological, moral and political entailments, which cannot be captured within reductionist accounts of the modern states retreat from religion.

Drawing on the work of Talal Asad, Saba sketches the discursive operations of political secularism that produces and naturalises the public and private domains, and through which the modern secular state reorganises religious life. In establishing these domains, secularism determines and regulates the content and shape of religion and its concomitant practices. Far from separating religion from the state, Saba demonstrates how secularism is implicated in producing religious difference and religious inequalities. It claims to relegate religion to the private sphere while at the same time it engages in regulating any number of aspects of socio-religious life, and in the process, falsifies the public /private distinction. In other words, it both regulates and constructs religion as a space free from state intervention, which requires that it be called upon to adjudicate the line between the public and private. This also means that when courts are called upon to determine whether a particular practice is an essential part

⁷ For other accounts see Hussein Ali Agrama, *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty and the rule of Law in Modern Egypt* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Mayanthi Fernando, *The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism* (Raleigh, Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, Secularism, and American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Joan Wallace Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1st edition, 2007); Ratna Kapur and Brenda Cossman, *Secularism's Last Sigh? Hindutva and the (Mis)Rule of Law* (Oxford, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001). See also Saba Mahmood and Peter Danchin, editors, *The Politics of Religious Freedom*, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Volume 113, no. 1 (2014). See also the 'Teaching Law and Case Study Archives' site curated by Winnifred Sullivan and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, available at <https://sites.northwestern.edu/lawreligion/>. The site builds on the earlier joint research project on the 'Politics of Religious Freedom' project with Saba Mahmood and Peter Danchin.

of either religious belief or a practice that can be regulated through the public order exceptions to religious freedom, 'secular' judges are engaged in nothing short of theological reasoning.

Saba demonstrates how religious liberty and minority rights took shape in the 19th century and within the context of the nation-state and global political inequality. She traces the Protestant origins of the distinction between religion and secularism and how this distinction is framed, sustained and maintained by the modern secular state. The analysis makes evident how religious majoritarianism is implicated in secularism, and religious difference cannot be understood or settled simply by 'the heavy hand of the law.'⁸ The resolution of sectarian or religious conflict cannot be pursued through a better model of secularism or through more secularism, given how secularism itself is implicated in producing the conflict.

In *A Minority Report*, Saba compares how the right to freedom of religion, which is a key component of secularism, functions in secular democracies in Europe as well as in Egypt to regulate and contain the rights of religious minorities through a majoritarian lens. This comparative analysis may at first glance not seem an obvious one to conduct. The open recognition of Islam as the official religion of Middle Eastern states, including Egypt and as integral to national identity seems to be illustrative of their lack of commitment to secularism that demands state neutrality. This lack is further evidenced in the conjoining of religion and citizenship through the existence of separate family laws as opposed to a shared civil code delinked from religious affiliation.⁹ These features are also present in a range of Asian countries which are also hence presumed to be non-secular.

However, Saba powerfully and persuasively demonstrates how religion also remains a predominant feature in the separation model of secularism based on State neutrality, where Christianity is central to the identity of Euro-Atlantic states. She illustrates how this fact is at times openly acknowledged by intellectuals, politicians and even the judiciary.¹⁰ She singles out the case of *Lautsi v Italy* decided by the European Court of Human Rights in 2011 that upheld the right of Italian public schools to display the crucifix in the classroom.¹¹ The Court

⁸ Talal Assad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*. (The Townsend Papers in Humanities No. 2) (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009). Mahmood argues that the moral injury experienced by Muslims in the Danish cartoon controversy was not addressed in the debates. Such an injury cannot be expressed in terms of rights and hence incommensurable with a rights discourse. As she argues, the rights of the minorities are framed, judged and litigated within the larger context of the rights of the majority. This framing remains incapable of fully grasping the nature of the injury or even the deeper epistemological challenge being presented by the 'Other'.

⁹ Mahmood, *A Minority Report*, Chapter 4, pp. 149-180.

¹⁰ See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) and Mahmood's critique of his position that describes secularism as a unique achievement of 'Latin Christianity', and in the process paints Latin Christianity as not only homogenous, but also providing a historical account that excludes Christianity's encounters with the world's 'Others': Saba Mahmood, 'Can Secularism Be Other-Wise?', in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, Michael Warner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, editors, 282-299 (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2010). Such accounts are unsustainable as they are based on exclusions that enable a progressive telling of history and normative claims based on those considered to be modern and civilized.

¹¹ Joseph Weiler represented *pro bono* 18 European states who challenged the lower chambers ruling upholding the ban on crucifixes in Italian public classrooms. Weiler argued that the lower chamber disregarded the religious dimension to Europe's history and that '[I]t is not the case that the cross is only a national symbol as some people would hold. That is nonsense. The cross is a national symbol and a religious symbol... It is both and it is understandable': See 'Crucifix in the Classroom: Joseph Weiler before the European Court of Human Rights, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ioyIyxM-gn>. Weiler has questioned why so many European public intellectuals are *Christophobic*: George Weigel, *The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America*

held that Christianity in Europe is linked to the right to the liberty of the person and the Enlightenment values of liberty and freedom of every person. While liberal democracies are more reluctant to acknowledge the presence of religion in secularism, Christianity remains integral to the national identity of some European states. The Court ultimately upheld the right to display the crucifix in public schools, stating:

It can therefore be contended that in the present-day social reality the crucifix should be regarded not only as a symbol of the historical and cultural development, and therefore identity of our people, but also as a symptom of a value system: liberty, equality, human dignity and religious toleration, and accordingly also of the secular nature of the state.¹²

As becomes evident the religious majoritarianism informing secularism is obscured through the ruse of neutrality and its histories cast as universal. Saba captures this seamless equation of secularism and Christianity, in a quote from Jürgen Habermas:

Egalitarian universalism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, of the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct heir to the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it. And in light of the current challenges of a postnational constellation, we continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. Everything else is just idle postmodern talk.¹³

As Saba remarks this statement stunningly attributes the entire development of secularism and democratic governance to a Judeo-Christian ethics of justice and love. It not only reinforces and reproduces a historically inaccurate narrative, but also draws attention to how Christian norms, values, and sensibilities are instantiated into narratives about European identity and become part of common sense thinking about secularism.¹⁴ An account that simply speaks to the deficiencies of secularism in non-Western contexts does not grasp how secularism structures the practices of religious belief and practices in the western, liberal democratic world. Saba's analysis ultimately presents how the structurally tenuous positions of minorities in liberal and authoritarian contexts and their situations of precariousness are continuously produced and sustained.¹⁵ Instead of offering a solution to the problem of religious tensions and demolishing religious hierarchies through the pursuit of equality, secularism is implicated in creating them. Saba argues that modern secular governance has played a prominent role in transforming pre-existing religious differences, producing communal strife, and making religion salient to both the minority and majority communities.¹⁶ In this narrative, neutrality is unmasked and the modern state exposed as being deeply involved in managing and regulating religious life that includes adjudicating on

and Politics Without God, (New York: Basic Books, Reprint edition 2006), p. 19. See also Joseph Weiler, *Un'Europa Cristiana: Un saggio esplorativo* (Milano: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 2003) (Christian Europe: An Exploratory Essay). Weiler draws a distinction between states that are *laïque* and those that are not, but fails to address how religious majoritarianism that is also present in the *laïque* model.

¹² Italian Administrative Court's judgement, *Lautsi and Others v. Italy*, 18 March, 2011, <http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/sites/eng/pages/search.aspx?i=001-104040>, para 15.

¹³ Mahmood, *A Minority Report*, p. 8

¹⁴ Mahmood, *A Minority Report*, p. 8.

¹⁵ Mahmood, *A Minority Report*, p. 6.

¹⁶ Mahmood, *A Minority Report*

matters of religious doctrine and practice. The continued presence of religion in the public arena is not a sign of incomplete secularisation, but part of the structural paradoxes of the secular project that has helped to shape forms of relations between the minority and majority.¹⁷

Saba's analysis of the role of religion in secularism provides a critical intervention in understanding developments in the contemporary world, where religion has spread through rights discourse and liberal democratic institutions in ways that have shaken progressive secular sensibilities. Central to this understanding is the argument that religious lives and politics cannot be displaced along an 'us and them' divide. Instead, Saba challenges us to think of the work that the secular is doing not only in the non-liberal non-democratic world, but also in progressive politics, rights discourse and the court room.

Recuperating Radicality from the Despair of Progressive Politics

In exploring alternative subjectivities with reference to the veil as well as exposing the integral relationship between secularism and religion, Saba opened herself to excoriating critiques and even invited hostility from the progressive left and feminists. The critiques on the veil centred on the Saba's ostensible negation of the desire by Muslim women to be free from traditional practices from which women within these communities sought liberation. Similarly, her work on secularism has been challenged as undermining the possibility of an exit for those caught in the web of religious fundamentalism. Yet in interrogating and reframing questions of secularism, religion and equality, Saba did not seek to demolish these concepts. Her position is much more nuanced and thoughtful than these critiques suggest and as set out in this dossier.¹⁸ Saba's arguments are informed by a desire to recuperate radicality from a progressive politics that remains lodged in despair and hopelessness. Her insights are designed to sharpen our intellectual tools in order to push back against Islamophobia as well as the limits of western liberal thought, without slipping into the position of a cultural relativist.

With regards to the veil, she demonstrates how a logic that insists on disrobing the Muslim woman perpetuates a colonial fantasy that this single, essential act of unveiling will ensure her liberation from the oppressive men and oppressive practices of her oppressive culture. Penalizing her failure to do so severely constricts and distorts the emancipatory principle of gender equality by equating it with the right of women to wear what they want in public – *except* when it is a veil. These strategies fail to appreciate how the meaning of the veil, for some Muslim women, cannot simply be inscribed within secular assumptions about choice and freedom. For such committed practitioners, 'the veil' is not what they simply opt to wear – a garment that can be donned or removed as required – but rather is their very mode of being, an elision of self-concept/image, interiority and identity.

Similarly, while some of her critics expressed fear that her analysis of secularism could easily play into the hands of religious fundamentalists to advance their anti-western, anti-secular

¹⁷ Mahmood, *A Minority Report*, p.2

¹⁸ See for example, Rachel Rinaldo, 'The Islamic Revival and Women's Political Subjectivity in Indonesia' *Women's Studies International Forum*, volume 33 (2010): 422-431, on how a focus on the ethical subject can run the risk overemphasising the role of individual agency in the decision-making; Elizabeth M. Bucar, 'Dianomy: Understanding Religious Women's Moral Agency as Creative Conformity, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Volume 78, no. 3 (2010): 662-686, on how the concept of 'dianomy' focuses on both the discursive and performative environment of religious women and better capture the model of agency being exercised.

agendas, Saba's analysis reveals how right wing and conservative forces have proven adept at being able to advance their ideological agendas in and through liberal values, including the discourse of secularism and its constituent elements, equality and tolerance. This political process speaks to the urgent need to retrieve and counter these encroachments through a focused critique. Saba's analysis calls for engagement with issues of religion or faith as a political force. It can encourage thinking in a more productive and radical direction, including the exploration, recovery or seizing of heterodox and esoteric components within different philosophical traditions that have been marginalized or obscured in the hegemonic claims of religious fundamentalists.

The critiques of Saba's work in these areas speaks to a deep reluctance on the part of the left globally including critical and feminist scholars, to engage the terrain of religion. In fact, the critiques invariably and reflexively fall back on uninterrogated understandings of secularism, and liberal individualism as a political counter to religious and rightwing agendas. Such reluctance cannot countenance new conceptions of freedom or alternative lifeworlds that have the slightest traces of 'religion'. And yet the questioning of secularism, equality and agency does not imply support for the rhetoric of cultural relativists, or ideologues of various persuasions. In fact, the analysis seeks to recuperate a radical political agenda, by occupying the semantic and political 'nonliberal' space that has all too often and easily been ceded to reactionary forces and orthodoxies by progressive, leftist, and feminist forces out of fear that it may mark them as 'religious' or unsecular. Indeed, it opens the possibility that has eluded postcolonial scholars to ground their positions outside of the violent legacies of the Enlightenment rather than to seek solutions within this very location.¹⁹

In questioning assumptions about religion and politics in liberal thought and feminism, Saba reflected the daring that is embodied in her work: to explore spaces deemed off limits in left politics or as taboo in feminist advocacy. In the process, she turned the gaze back on progressive politics and encouraged engagement in a politics of 'self-parochialization' reflected in the opening quote of this dossier.²⁰ Quite specifically this process involves surrendering our conceits, engaging another's world view and demonstrate a willingness 'to learn things that we did not already know before we undertook the engagement.'²¹ Saba was a formidable scholar and public intellectual who demonstrated an indomitable spirit captured in her vivacious personality and effervescent, vibrant laughter. Her incandescent spirit will undoubtedly continue to inspire critical intellectual thought and the next generation of critical scholars.

When I first met Saba at a workshop she organised on secularism and religious freedom, we became fast friends. Over the next far too few years of our friendship we not only shared an intense exchange of our work with one another, but also the multiple lives and loves that connected our personal, intimate and political concerns to a broad spectrum of issues. These ranged from the same-sex marriage debates, free speech and the response of progressives to the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, the politics of Palestine and US interventions in West Asia, as well as the joys of nature, food, the bonds of friendship and poetry.

¹⁹ Thus it challenges Chakrabarty's resignation that the postcolonial thinker must inevitably come to terms with this irony Dipesh Chakrabarty. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000).

²⁰ Webb Keane, 'Saba Mahmood and the Paradoxes of Self-Parochialization', *Public Books*, available at <https://www.publicbooks.org/saba-mahmood-and-the-paradoxes-of-self-parochialization/>

²¹ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, p.37.